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Fourth report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1734 (2006), by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL) until 31 December 2007, and requested me to keep it regularly informed of progress made in the implementation of the mandate of the Office. The present report provides an update on major developments in Sierra Leone and the activities of UNIOSIL since my report of 28 November (S/2006/922).

II. Major developments

2. Sierra Leone continued to make progress in the peace consolidation process. The capacity of the national institutions responsible for conducting the July 2007 presidential and parliamentarian elections and that of the security sector was further enhanced. Nonetheless, the Government still faces serious capacity constraints and continues to require external assistance. The socio-economic situation in Sierra Leone remains difficult. Poverty and unemployment, particularly among the young, continue to be widespread, while the Government's ability to deliver basic services to the population remains weak.

3. The registration of voters for the elections commenced on 26 February and was completed on 18 March 2007. Within the framework of its assistance programme for the National Electoral Commission, the United Nations provided the Commission with considerable policy, technical and financial support. In spite of the logistical complexity of the voter registration exercise and the Commission's limited operational capacity, the registration was a success. Some 2.6 million, or 91 per cent, of the eligible voters have registered, with women accounting for 48 per cent of the registered voters and youth below the age of 32 accounting for 56 per cent of those registered.

4. The high voter registration turnout was largely due to the country-wide campaign of civic education carried out by the National Electoral Commission, mobilization of the electorate by political parties and non-governmental organizations and the active involvement of the media, including United Nations Radio. In spite of some complaints, the main political parties expressed satisfaction

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with the conduct and outcome of the registration exercise. This success has contributed to the reinforcing of the credibility of the overall electoral process.

5. Over the past few months, political parties have stepped up their electoral campaigning activities. In this regard, it is encouraging to note that campaigning has been characterized by an increased spirit of tolerance and civic responsibility. This is also due to the intensive civic education campaign and capacity-building efforts conducted by the National Electoral Commission and the Political Parties Registration Commission. In addition, UNIOSIL and the United Nations country team provided senior officials of the major political parties with training in conflict mitigation and dispute prevention.

6. On 23 November 2006, the Political Parties Registration Commission, with UNIOSIL support, developed a Political Parties Code of Conduct for the elections. All major political parties, including the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party, the All People's Congress and the People's Movement for Democratic Change, have agreed to comply with the Code. This was an important development, as the Code provides for a monitoring and enforcement mechanism to address irregularities and complaints in campaigning. Also, on 17 March, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, with the assistance of UNIOSIL and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), concluded a Media Code of Conduct. Under this Code, major national media institutions have agreed to exercise self-restraint and accepted monitoring of their performance by an independent panel. This positive development will help ensure more objective and professional media coverage of the elections.

7. Following the 12 December 2006 country-specific meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission on Sierra Leone, the country's engagement with the Commission has intensified. In January 2007, the Commission adopted a six-month workplan for Sierra Leone and agreed to develop an integrated peacebuilding compact with the Government of Sierra Leone. This compact is expected to provide a framework for the mutual commitments of the Government and the international community, assist the Government in addressing its peacebuilding priorities, as endorsed by the Commission, and help ensure a coherent and coordinated approach in addressing gaps in critical peacebuilding areas.

8. In February 2007, the Peacebuilding Support Office fielded a technical mission to Sierra Leone to assist the Government and key stakeholders in finalizing Sierra Leone's priority plan for the Peacebuilding Fund. Subsequently, on 1 March, I approved a country envelope of $35 million from the Peacebuilding Fund to support Sierra Leone's priority peacebuilding projects. The implementation of these projects is expected to commence in May.

9. Representatives of the Peacebuilding Commission also visited Sierra Leone from 20 to 25 March to assess progress and the remaining challenges in the peace consolidation process. During the visit, the Commission and the Government agreed to work together to complete the integrated peacebuilding compact by June, so that it could be endorsed by the new Government, following the July elections. In order to assist the Government in developing the compact, a multidisciplinary technical mission, comprising the Peacebuilding Support Office, UNDP, and the Department of Political Affairs, visited Sierra Leone in the second half of April.

10. During the reporting period, the potential impact of the political crisis in Guinea on the fragile stability of Sierra Leone was a source of serious concern. To help stabilize the situation, on 20 February, Presidents Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia visited Conakry and discussed ways of resolving the crisis with President Lansana Conté of Guinea. This visit was an important demonstration of the commitment by the leaders of the Mano River Union countries to maintaining peace and stability in the subregion.

11. On 30 April, a meeting of the Heads of State of the Mano River Union was held in Conakry to discuss the disputed area of Yenga at the border between Guinea and Sierra Leone. The summit confirmed the need to continue close consultations among the regional leaders in order to resolve the issue as soon as possible.

III. Security situation

12. The security situation in Sierra Leone has remained stable but fragile during the reporting period. The high rates of youth unemployment, persistent negative public perceptions about the lack of accountability by the authorities, the weak justice system and the lack of improvement in the living standards of the overwhelming majority of the population remain the key threats to the country's fragile stability.

13. In late April, there were a number of fire outbreaks reported in the southern province, which appeared to be caused by arson, and which resulted in a significant destruction of property and displacement of residents. On 23 April, some 50 houses were burned down in one village in the Pujehun District. It is not clear, however, whether these acts were politically motivated, although electoral campaigning by political parties has been particularly intense in this province. The Sierra Leone Police are investigating these incidents.

14. From 22 to 28 January, the United Nations Mission in Liberia successfully conducted a periodic training exercise in support of security of the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

IV. Security sector reform

A. Sierra Leone Police

15. From November 2006 to February 2007, UNIOSIL, the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Sierra Leone Police jointly developed a national security plan for the voter registration exercise, which was successfully implemented. A similar plan is being developed for the July elections.

16. During the reporting period, the Sierra Leone Police, with the assistance of UNIOSIL and the Department for International Development, provided training to some 2,200 police personnel in crowd control and public order management. The trained police personnel will be deployed in high-threat urban areas.

17. From 29 to 30 March, UNIOSIL, in cooperation with UNDP and the United Kingdom-led Justice Sector Development Programme, organized a conference for

the Sierra Leone Police on community policing, aimed at enhancing the cooperation between the police and the population, in particular during the July elections.

18. Although the Sierra Leone Police has received training in crowd control techniques, it continued to experience difficulties in fulfilling its duties due to the lack of logistical support. In addition, police personnel are still lacking the basic equipment needed to effectively perform their duties.

B. Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces

19. The Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces has continued to review its structure with the support of the International Military Advisory and Training Team and the Department for International Development. The review aims at creating an affordable armed force, given the country's limited resources, which would have an increased deployment capability and enhanced operational and logistical performance. It is envisaged that the armed forces would scale down from 10,300 to approximately 8,500 military personnel over the next few years, mainly through natural attrition and the provision of a voluntary redundancy package.

20. The Government of Sierra Leone has indicated to the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations its willingness to participate in peacekeeping activities. A few Sierra Leone military observers have been trained and deployed in United Nations peace operations; one is deployed in Timor-Leste and another two in Nepal. Five United Nations Military Observers in Sierra Leone are being considered for deployment in the Sudan.

21. Sierra Leone's armed forces continue to suffer from a serious lack of logistical support, equipment and accommodation. Some 55 per cent of the military personnel and their families are housed in substandard conditions, which impacts negatively on the morale of the troops. The main barracks in Freetown are overcrowded, with some families living in stores and armories, with no access to safe drinking water or proper sanitation. Similar unacceptable conditions exist in the military barracks in the provinces. In addition, military salaries have remained static, while the cost of living has risen. These issues were discussed on 5 April, during a special meeting between President Kabbah and the command of Sierra Leone's Armed Forces.

V. Preparations for the 2007 elections

A. National Electoral Commission

22. The National Electoral Commission, supported by UNIOSIL and UNDP, continued to make steady progress in the preparation for the July elections. On 30 November 2006, the Sierra Leone Parliament approved the constituency boundary delimitation proposal, which had been prepared by the National Electoral Commission. This proposal established new constituency boundaries that take into account the considerable movement by the population throughout the country since the end of the conflict. The July elections will be the first constituency-based elections to be held in more than two decades. The general elections held in 2002 were based on proportional representation.

23. The Commission further consolidated its operational base by recruiting and training additional staff. In particular, it engaged 270 registration supervisors, who provided training to some 12,000 registration staff who were temporarily recruited for the voter registration exercise. In addition, the National Electoral Commission used electronic and print media, town criers in the rural areas and musical jingles to educate voters on the registration exercise.

24. During the period under review, the United Nations electoral advisory team was considerably reinforced and reached its full strength by early January. There are now 19 advisers to the National Electoral Commission headquarters, of whom 14 are technical advisers and five are United Nations Volunteers. In addition, there are 28 United Nations Volunteers deployed throughout the country to support local electoral offices. UNDP has also assigned a full-time technical adviser to assist the Political Parties Registration Commission.

25. On 28 December 2006, the European Commission signed an agreement with UNDP to provide a grant of 8 million euros (€) for the UNDP-run basket fund for the elections. Japan contributed 2.8 million United States dollars ($) on 16 March, while Denmark provided some 5 million Danish kroner on 21 March. Other contributions came from the Government of Ireland, which provided some €1 million in mid-January, and the United Kingdom, which provided 2.5 million pounds sterling (£) in November 2006. These contributions helped to alleviate the shortfall in electoral funding and to expedite the completion of preparations for voter registration. I would like to thank those Member States and international partners that generously provided funds to support the elections.

B. Further electoral preparations

26. In the meantime, the National Electoral Commission commenced the drafting of election petition rules. This legislative measure is required, as there are no provisions in the 1991 Constitution or the Electoral Act of 2002 under which a parliamentary election could be challenged.

27. It should be recalled that the elections are scheduled at the peak of the rainy season and that this poses considerable logistical challenges. There will be additional pressure on the National Electoral Commission to ensure the timely delivery and distribution of election materials, particularly in parts of the country that are difficult to access. As a result, it will be necessary to ensure the availability of appropriate means of transportation, including boats and air assets.

C. Political Parties Registration Commission

28. The new Chairman of the Political Parties Registration Commission, Justice Sydney Warne, assumed office on 12 February, after being approved by the Sierra Leone Parliament. In the meantime, the Commission still faces an acute shortage of operational assets and funds. UNIOSIL, UNDP and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have provided technical and financial assistance to the Commission. They also encourage the Government to honour its financial obligations towards the budget of this important body.

29. Currently, the Commission is focused on monitoring the implementation of the Political Parties Code of Conduct, mediating disputes between political actors, sensitizing paramount chiefs on their role in ensuring the credibility of the elections and working with political parties to encourage them to promote women's participation in the elections.

30. Following the adoption of the Political Parties Code of Conduct in January, the Commission established a Code-Monitoring Committee to promote compliance with the Code of Conduct. The Committee comprises representatives from each of the registered parties, civil society and the Sierra Leone Police. The Commission also established district subcommittees. With the support of UNIOSIL and UNDP, all Committee personnel have received training in mediation of disputes and conflict mitigation.

31. The United Nations supported the Commission's efforts to sensitize paramount chiefs to the importance of allowing political parties to conduct electoral campaigning in their chiefdoms without hindrance. Additionally, the Commission invited paramount chiefs to work with the electoral institutions in addressing political intolerance, which has become a major political problem in some chiefdoms.

D. Referendum on the revision of the 1991 Constitution

32. In September 2006, the Government set up a Constitutional Review Commission to revise the 1991 Constitution. This step was in line with the Lomé Peace Agreement and the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After completing the preparatory work in April, the Commission recommended that a number of changes be made to the Constitution, including a broadening of the criteria for citizenship; protection for the environment; the right to collective bargaining; the removal of provisions relating to gender discrimination; legal proceedings in cases of human rights violations; and the creation of a separate chamber of paramount chiefs in the Parliament. In addition, although UNIOSIL had proposed that the Commission consider the abolition of the death penalty, it was decided that the death penalty should be retained.

33. Given the importance of the proposed recommendations, it is expected that they will be subject to extensive public debate, which has yet to take place. In the meantime, the Government has recently confirmed its intention to conduct the constitutional referendum simultaneously with the July 2007 elections. The Constitution provides that such a referendum should be organized by the National Electoral Commission. After considering a number of options and having consulted with the Government, the National Electoral Commission determined that it would be better to conduct the referendum in November 2008. In the meantime, UNIOSIL and other key stakeholders have appealed to the Government to separate the July elections and the constitutional referendum to allow for the unimpeded conduct of the elections.

VI. Governance

34. Progress in anti-corruption efforts and promotion of accountability has been painfully slow. The planned review of the national anti-corruption strategy, adopted in 2006, is falling behind schedule. The failure to prosecute alleged offenders on the grounds of insufficient evidence raises questions of investigative capacity of the Anti-Corruption Commission and, more importantly, of political will. The Government needs to accelerate its anti-corruption efforts, especially within the context of the Improved Governance and Accountability Pact, agreed to by the Government and key international partners in July 2006.

35. In order to further enhance its capacity, Sierra Leone's Parliament needs to establish a legal department that will be able to prepare draft bills and analyse their implications. In the meantime, UNIOSIL, in collaboration with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, has launched a programme to assist the Parliament in developing legislative and institutional frameworks that would encourage a more transparent and accountable democratic governance system. The programme would facilitate the work of the Public Accounts Committee and of the committees that oversee the military and security agencies. In addition, in February and March, UNIOSIL and UNDP conducted a four-week computer skills training course for clerical staff of the Parliament.

VII. Consolidation of State authority throughout the country

36. While the decentralization process initiated by the Government, following the 2004 local government elections, has made significant progress, the devolution of authority to the district/town level remains a serious challenge. District councils remain weak and lack resources, in spite of the considerable support to the decentralization programme rendered by the World Bank, UNDP and some non-governmental organizations. The functions of some public services, notably health, education and agriculture, have only been partially devolved and are slow and insufficient, while decision-making and budgetary responsibilities still remain centralized. Further legislative measures are needed to make policies and roles of central and local authorities consistent with the Local Government Act. Moreover, the role of the paramount chiefs in the new local governance setup needs to be clarified.

37. Decentralization has the potential to reconnect the centre with rural communities and to promote socio-economic development and broader community participation. As it forges ahead, it requires proper balancing of responsibilities between the central Government, local councils, traditional leaders and community members. A major effort is needed to build the resource base of the local councils and their administrative and technical capacities. Inadequate funding from the central Government and the lack of proper revenue mobilization mechanisms deprive the councils of fiscal autonomy and render them ineffective in meeting their responsibilities. To address this, the United Nations has recently initiated a capacity-building project on revenue mobilization for local councils. The project will be expanded across the country as soon as more resources become available. In the longer term, in order to assist the process of further consolidation of State authority throughout the country, the United Nations and other international stakeholders will need to agree with the Government on the strategy for the future and on how to

streamline the activities of the Decentralization Secretariat and the Ministry of Local Government and to increase coordination within the Government.

VIII. Socio-economic developments

38. Sierra Leone's economy continues to depend on external sources for development, investment, consumer goods and industrial inputs. The total inflow of resources from development partners in 2006 is estimated at $351.5 million. Nevertheless, the macroeconomic performance of the country has been improving. Inflation is now reported to have declined to 9 per cent. In addition, the Government is in the process of undertaking a three-year mapping exercise of the country's mineral resources, with a view to generating increased revenues through the auctioning of mining rights.

39. While growth has been high, further external investments and the support of international partners will be needed to reduce poverty and to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. An estimated 26 per cent of the population lives in extreme poverty, while 70 per cent lives on less than $1 per day. The situation is exacerbated by high unemployment and deteriorating health conditions, especially with the growing incidence of HIV/AIDS, typhoid, malaria and tuberculosis and high maternal, infant and child mortality rates. Most households live in substandard shelters and only 59 per cent of the population has access to safe drinking water.

40. The attainment of food security is a major priority for the Government. Rice is the main staple food and its production is projected to increase so that rice imports could cease by 2008. Increased Government expenditure on education has led to a dramatic rise in primary enrolment ratios. The focus on girls' education has increased female enrolment to near parity with boys' in primary school.

IX. Human rights and rule of law

A. Implementation of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

41. Sierra Leone made further progress in implementing the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, particularly those related to the creation of the National Human Rights Commission; the broadening of the Judicial and Legal Service Commission, the adoption of a binding code of conduct for judges and magistrates; and the passage of the Human Trafficking Bill. While a considerable number of important recommendations have yet to be implemented, efforts are in progress to repeal statutory and customary laws discriminating against women. The Government also took steps to implement a reparations programme for the victims of the conflict, as recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and identified an implementing agency. In addition, a trust fund for war victims will be established soon.

42. I am particularly pleased to note the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission with the support of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UNIOSIL. Both OHCHR and UNIOSIL provided technical assistance for the drafting of the relevant law, and the

nomination and appointment of the Commissioners. OHCHR also contracted the services of a member of the Uganda Human Rights Commission, who has worked with the Government and the Commission for five months. In March, in order to build and strengthen the capacity of the Commission, UNIOSIL, in partnership with OHCHR, organized a comprehensive training programme for the Commission's personnel and facilitated logistical support for its start-up operations.

B. Rule of law

43. Progress in the justice sector remains slow. A series of consultations were held among key stakeholders to formulate a justice sector development strategy, which has since been approved by the Steering Committee of the United Kingdom-led Justice Sector Development Programme. It focuses on strengthening the rule of law, access to justice, institutional capacity-building and safe communities. Through the advocacy of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the National Child Justice Strategy, which provides an overall framework to protect the rights of children in the criminal justice system, was launched in December 2006.

44. Notwithstanding these positive developments, several problems still need to be urgently addressed, including prolonged pre-trial detentions and excessive remand and adjournment of cases; structural inadequacies of the local courts; and the weak response and enforcement mechanism related to gender-based violence.

45. To facilitate the judicial reform, UNIOSIL has embarked upon a more structured engagement with all key partners in the justice sector. A Justice Sector Coordination Committee was established in February, comprising the Justice Sector Development Programme, UNIOSIL, UNDP, UNICEF, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the World Bank, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom and Irish Aid. This forum will coordinate activities in the justice sector to prevent overlapping and encourage the streamlining of various interventions and initiatives.

X. Action plan for the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security

46. UNIOSIL continues to coordinate the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) under the action plan prepared by the United Nations system in Sierra Leone. A joint UNIFEM/Peacebuilding Support Office gender assessment mission was conducted in Sierra Leone in January 2007. The assessment facilitated the development of a road map for the implementation of the United Nations action plan.

47. To promote gender equality through advocacy of women's empowerment, the United Nations country team focuses on encouraging greater participation by women in the electoral process; promoting the rights of women, including through legislation to address sexual and gender-based violence; supporting the enforcement of legislation; building the capacity of the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police; and promoting women's economic empowerment.

48. UNIOSIL has been advocating women's involvement, including as candidates, at all stages of the electoral process. During the voter registration exercise, UNIOSIL worked closely with the National Electoral Commission to deliver specific messages targeting women. United Nations Radio collaborates with community radios to enhance women's confidence and capacity to participate in the political process. The challenge now is how to translate those initiatives into greater numbers of women candidates. In this regard, the United Nations is working closely with the Political Parties Registration Commission.

49. The Political Parties Registration Commission, with UNIOSIL assistance, organized three regional workshops, which helped formulate a comprehensive strategy on increasing women's representation in key governance institutions, including in Parliament and local councils. In addition, these efforts resulted in the announcement by President Kabbah that he would issue a "certificate of urgency" for the speedy passage of three bills relating to domestic violence, the devolution of estate succession and the registration of customary marriages and divorces that are being considered by the Parliament. UNIOSIL and the United Nations country team are working with the Government and Parliament to ensure the early adoption of these important bills.

50. In my report of 28 November 2006 (S/2006/922), I indicated that the effective implementation of the action plan would require the establishment of a full-time post of gender adviser in UNIOSIL. A gender adviser has now been recruited.

XI. Public information and communication

51. UNIOSIL has been working closely with a new independent broadcast news service, Cotton Tree News, which was launched on 19 February. This project is managed by the Swiss non-governmental organization L'Hirondelle, and is sponsored by the European Union, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Switzerland. Cotton Tree News broadcasts a daily service of live news and information, which is run simultaneously on United Nations Radio to ensure country-wide coverage. The establishment of the new service marks a significant step in the joint efforts of the United Nations, the donor community and the Government to develop local technical capacity for a national public service broadcaster, so that the transfer of United Nations Radio capacity to national ownership could be considered at an appropriate time in the future.

52. UNIOSIL also took the lead, within the framework of the United Nations Communications Group in Sierra Leone, in implementing a joint strategy outlining multimedia projects to inform a wider spectrum of the public, including women, youth, politicians, civil society, traditional leaders and the media about the new, constituency-based electoral system.

XII. Integration within the United Nations system

53. To assist the Government of Sierra Leone in furthering the consolidation of peace and in fulfilling its mandate, as outlined in Security Council resolution 1620 (2005), UNIOSIL has continued to maintain close coordination with all United Nations agencies, the Government, the diplomatic community, international donors

and non-governmental organizations. To that end, a peace consolidation strategy, developed by the Government with the support of UNIOSIL and the United Nations country team, has guided the formulation of critical peacebuilding projects, which will be submitted for funding from the Peacebuilding Fund.

54. UNIOSIL and the United Nations agencies have jointly formulated and adopted a new United Nations Development Assistance Framework for the period from 2008 to 2010, which seeks to link governance and human rights objectives with sustainable growth and human development. In the meantime, the United Nations Transition Support Team, which is deployed throughout the country, continues to work towards building the capacity of local councils.

55. In addition to United Nations aid coordination activities, UNIOSIL has maintained continued engagement with international partners through monthly policy meetings and other gatherings on key issues, such as development aid, accountability, preparations for elections, human rights, security and youth employment and empowerment. The Office is also expected to play an important coordination role among concerned stakeholders with regard to the implementation of the integrated peacebuilding compact, referred to in paragraphs 7 and 9 above, once the Compact has been concluded.

XIII. HIV/AIDS

56. The United Nations continues to support activities aimed at strengthening the national response to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS. During the reporting period, the United Nations conducted an assessment of paediatric AIDS care in the country and assisted the national HIV/AIDS secretariat in developing its programme of work and national guidelines on HIV/AIDS.

57. The United Nations system in Sierra Leone has also developed a workplan within the framework of the Mano River Union and the Côte d'Ivoire HIV/AIDS project. In this regard, two blood donation campaigns were conducted, voluntary counselling was provided and several treatment centres were refurbished. In addition, a peer educators training and counselling programme in homes was launched.

XIV. Sexual exploitation and abuse

58. There were no reported cases of sexual exploitation and abuse in UNIOSIL during the reporting period. UNIOSIL has focused on training and sensitizing personnel on sexual exploitation and abuse. A joint task force established in May 2005, comprising the United Nations country team, in which personnel of UNIOSIL and the Special Court for Sierra Leone also participate, continues its activities in providing training for and sensitizing United Nations personnel and the local population on issues related to sexual exploitation and abuse. During the reporting period, an additional group of 30 United Nations personnel received training on the requirements of the Secretary-General's bulletin on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (ST/SGB/2003/13).

XV. Observations and recommendations

59. I am encouraged by the progress made by Sierra Leone in the peace consolidation process. General positive developments within the past few months have strengthened the prospects for long-term peace, stability and economic recovery in the country. At the same time, it is also clear that Sierra Leone still needs to remain focused on addressing the root causes of the past conflict, such as promoting good governance and anti-corruption efforts, economic recovery, improving access to justice and paying increased attention to the promotion of human rights. In this regard, the country clearly needs the support of the international community. In this regard, the continued engagement of the Peacebuilding Commission with Sierra Leone and, in particular, the agreement reached between the Government and the Commission on the development of an integrated framework compact for peacebuilding, is very encouraging. I urge the Government of Sierra Leone to work closely with the Commission in developing the compact and in ensuring its successful and timely implementation.

60. The fact that 91 per cent of the eligible voters have registered for the July 2007 elections is both a demonstration of the civic maturity of the people of Sierra Leone and an important indication of the increased capacity of the National Electoral Commission. It is also indicative of the fact that the population wishes to exercise the right of choice. The forthcoming elections offer a unique opportunity to create a new social and economic dynamic in the country and to provide it with the much-needed psychological boost in favour of change.

61. The first stage of the electoral process has proven to be a remarkable success. The participation by many women in the registration of voters is particularly welcome. It will be important to continue to promote gender equality and youth empowerment by encouraging the participation of women and youth candidates in the elections. In the meantime, Sierra Leone's political parties should be guided by the code of conduct that they have voluntarily accepted, while the country's media institutions will need to display objectivity and professionalism consistent with the letter and spirit of the recently concluded Media Code of Conduct.

62. The generous contributions made by the European Community, Denmark, Ireland, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and UNDP to the electoral basket fund are key to the successful holding of the elections. The Government of Sierra Leone itself should continue to meet its obligations to the electoral budget in a timely manner. As the period leading up to the elections is critical, it is crucial that donors deliver their assistance in a timely manner to enable the electoral institutions and the security sector to carry out their elections-related tasks. In addition, the international community will be expected to actively participate in the observation of the elections.

63. In order to further advance peace consolidation, it is essential that positive developments in the political process be accompanied by a considerable enhancement of the security sector. Progress made in this area remains fragile. Both the Sierra Leone Armed Forces and the Sierra Leone Police need significant additional support, especially in equipment and accommodation, if they are to effectively implement their tasks. At the same time, the fostering of a solid private sector to transform the economy and create employment opportunities needs to be encouraged. Without a vibrant economy based on free-market principles and clean

practices, the country will not be able to achieve the much-needed acceleration of its growth rate. To support social and economic transformation, both the Government and its international partners should step up efforts to expedite reform of the judiciary and to pay increased attention to the promotion of human rights, especially of women and children.

64. I am pleased to report that UNIOSIL has been effectively coordinating the activities of the United Nations system and other international partners in Sierra Leone. This collaboration has been instrumental in increasing the effectiveness of foreign assistance to help address the root causes of the conflict and in building the capacity of critical national institutions. In this regard, the conduct of the July elections will also help define an exit strategy for UNIOSIL. It remains my intention to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the role played by UNIOSIL and to submit to the Council my recommendations on the future United Nations presence in the country before October 2007.

65. In the meantime, I wish to express my sincere thanks to the international partners for their continued constructive engagement with the Government of Sierra Leone and UNIOSIL. I extend my thanks to all personnel serving in this Office for their unwavering support for the cause of peace and stability in Sierra Leone. I would also like to thank my Executive Representative, Victor Angelo, and all staff members of the United Nations system in Sierra Leone for their tireless efforts to ensure that the country enjoys lasting peace and sustainable development.

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